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Written statement* submitted by the Reporters Sans Frontiers International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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News providers as a first line of defence for human rights defenders

Journalists play a critical role in newsgathering, observing and witnessing at demonstrations. By their very nature, these are events of public interest. Indeed, in ensuring a free flow of information, they represent the first line of defense for human rights defenders, particularly during peaceful demonstrations.

However, in keeping with a pattern set in 2013, the year 2014 was marked by increased violence against news providers covering protest gatherings.

A large number of journalists – professional and amateur, local and foreign – are insulted, threatened, attacked or killed, while covering demonstrations. Some are directly targeted; others are collateral victims. Violence may come from security forces or from demonstrators. Responding to the increase in these events, the UN Human Rights Council on 28 March 2014 expressed *"concern about the number of attacks targeting human rights defenders and journalists in the context of peaceful protests."* The Council called on *"all states to pay particular attention to the safety of journalists and media workers covering peaceful protests, taking into account their specific role, exposure and vulnerability."* That standard of protection applies equally to amateur journalists and professionals.

Targeted by security forces...

Once again this year, security force violence took a heavy toll on journalists. In Ukraine, during the Maidan movement in January and February of 2014, journalists were deliberately and systematically targeted by the "Berkut" riot police. A determined policy of repression was evident from beatings, firing of rubber bullets and discharge of stun grenades, and an overall increase in violence waged with complete impunity.

In Turkey , one year after the *"Occupy Gezi"* demonstrations, impunity clearly has encouraged police to resort to violence: clubbing, and the use of tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets. Following the toppling of Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013, security forces in Egypt are targeting journalists, especially those working for media with direct or indirect ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. In Yemen , riot police beat at least 15 journalists and threatened them with firearms during demonstrations in Aden in June, 2014.

During the *"Occupy Central"* demonstrations in Hong Kong, frequent police misconduct includes physical aggression, and harassment – even sexual harassment – aimed at reporters and photojournalists. Police do not hesitate to call on organized crime groups to commit these offences.

In Venezuela, the national Bolivarian Army deliberately fires on journalists who are clearly identified as such. For example, Mildred Manrique was attacked and threatened no fewer than four times in February-May, 2014 as she covered demonstrations against crime, inflation and shortages. Military police in Brazil insulted and beat Karinny de Magalhães while she covered demonstrations against World Cup-related spending. The police told her that journalists were *"a cancer of the world,"* and that *"you should all die."*

In Greece, the MAT riot police persist in crackdowns on photojournalists and television video and sound crews, treating them as troublesome witnesses in a climate of impunity.

...And targeted by protesters

Attacks are not only coming from security forces. Some demonstrators also have journalists in their sights. Instead of considering journalists as independent observers, protesters all too often treat news providers as enemies with a stake in the conflict.

In Thailand, frustrations over official channels' non-coverage or biased coverage of anti-government demonstrations that shook the country in November, 2013, led to attacks on journalists for supposedly favouring the government in reports. Demonstrators also took over the offices of six television stations, demanding broadcast of statements, and a halt to coverage of any information originating with the government.

Along the same lines, media offices have been besieged in Hong Kong, and attacked during civil disorders in Venezuela. In the latter country, long-lasting demonstrations have served as fertile terrain for small groups of violent protesters, who do not shrink from using Molotov cocktails and other explosives. Journalists in Haiti, all too often identified as political players in a deeply polarized country, are attacked and insulted by demonstrators from the opposing camp.

In France, verbal and physical attacks on journalists are becoming more frequent. "*Journalists, collaborators,*" chanted protesters who opposed Canal Plus journalists during a "*Day of Anger*" rally against government action on January 26, 2014. Tensions can run so high that news media sometimes hire bodyguards for reporters.

Unjust legal actions

In addition to violence, journalists are frequently subject to arrest and to arbitrary convictions. In Bahrain, arrest, torture and mistreatment have become common for those who cover demonstrations. Prosecuted under flimsy pretexts, they have been hit with lengthy prison terms for documenting the repression of the "Tamarod" anti-government demonstrations of July, 2013. In Egypt, at least 15 journalists were detained for questioning during demonstrations marking the third anniversary of the revolution on 25 January, 2014. In Algeria, during the run-up to the presidential election of 17 April, 2014, numerous journalists were arrested during demonstrations against President Bouteflika, who was running for a fourth term. "*The police had clearly been told to arrest everyone,*" said Hacen Ouali, a journalist from *El Watan*, who was detained on March 5, 2014.

According to the Hong Kong Journalists Association, approximately 30 news providers were attacked during the "Umbrella Revolution." In Venezuela, the national journalists' union has reported that more than 20 media workers were arrested in February-April, 2014. In the United States, at least 15 journalists were arbitrarily arrested during confrontations between police and demonstrators following the death of Michael Brown, an African-American shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, on 9 August, 2014.

An attempt to limit demonstrations' media echo by Governments

In addition to direct attacks, government officials also try to hamper journalists' work by imposing burdensome restrictions. Many reporters have had their equipment seized or destroyed. Some have had been blocked from access to demonstrations. In Turkey, for example, officials limited entry to a perimeter that police established around Taksim Square. Only journalists with press cards provided by the Prime Minister's office were allowed in.

Some countries attempt to lessen demonstrations' media presence by censoring news about protests. During the "Umbrella Revolution," for example, China stepped up efforts to limit coverage – blocking access to sites and images; suppressing many posts and commentaries on blogs; and attempting to change the tone of news coverage. In Venezuela, faced with the increasing size of demonstrations, officials announced that "*coverage of violent events*" would be subject

to sanctions. The broadcast signal of the Colombian news channel *NTN24* (which reported on opposition demands) was cut off in Venezuela.

Criminalization of demonstration coverage

Fear of the spread of anti-establishment movements is leading governments to take increasingly harsh steps to limit freedom of assembly and media coverage of protests. The most striking examples of this trend are seen in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where a *"post-Maidan"* effect has taken hold. Before the fall of President Victor Yanukovych in Ukraine, the country's parliament tried to counter the opposition movement by penalizing defamation and by facilitating the blocking of websites without court order. Russia and Kazakhstan have adopted measures to criminalize calls to participate in unauthorized demonstrations.

In the European Union, several pieces of legislation in 2014 attempted to limit journalists' ability to photograph security forces or demonstrators. Spain adopted a law on public safety in December, 2014 that includes a fine of up to 600,000 euros for taking or circulating images that damage the honour, image or safety of security forces.

Journalists share a bewildered response to the numerous attacks they endure for covering demonstrations: *"I was only doing my job,"* they say again and again. Beyond the need to protect information workers, there is an urgent need for governments to show greater political will to fight impunity. In order to clamp down on violence, people found to have obstructed journalists' work, or to have attacked them as they covered demonstrations, must be prosecuted.

Recommendations

- Member States should acknowledge that media coverage is an essential requirement for promoting and protecting human rights defenders during peaceful protests.
- Member States should make it clear that the right of journalists to gather and impart information is not conditional on their holding a press card or accreditation.
- Member States should respect the right to cover peaceful protests, including ensuring full access to places where demonstrators gather, as well as the right to film, interview and take pictures of both demonstrators and security forces.
- Covering peaceful protests should never be reason to deny visas or accreditation to journalists.
- Member States should provide international human rights training to the security forces.
- Member States should combat impunity by establishing specific criminal penalties and disciplinary sanctions for human rights violations and systematically prosecute perpetrators.
- Member States should establish procedures to compensate journalists for equipment damaged or confiscated or for medical fees arising from injuries caused by members of the security forces or government officials.